

### Cite this article

Wille, Christian (2024): Reflections on Complexity-oriented Border Research. BorderObs, UniGR-Center for Border Studies, <https://hdl.handle.net/10993/60116>.

## Reflections on Complexity-oriented Border Research

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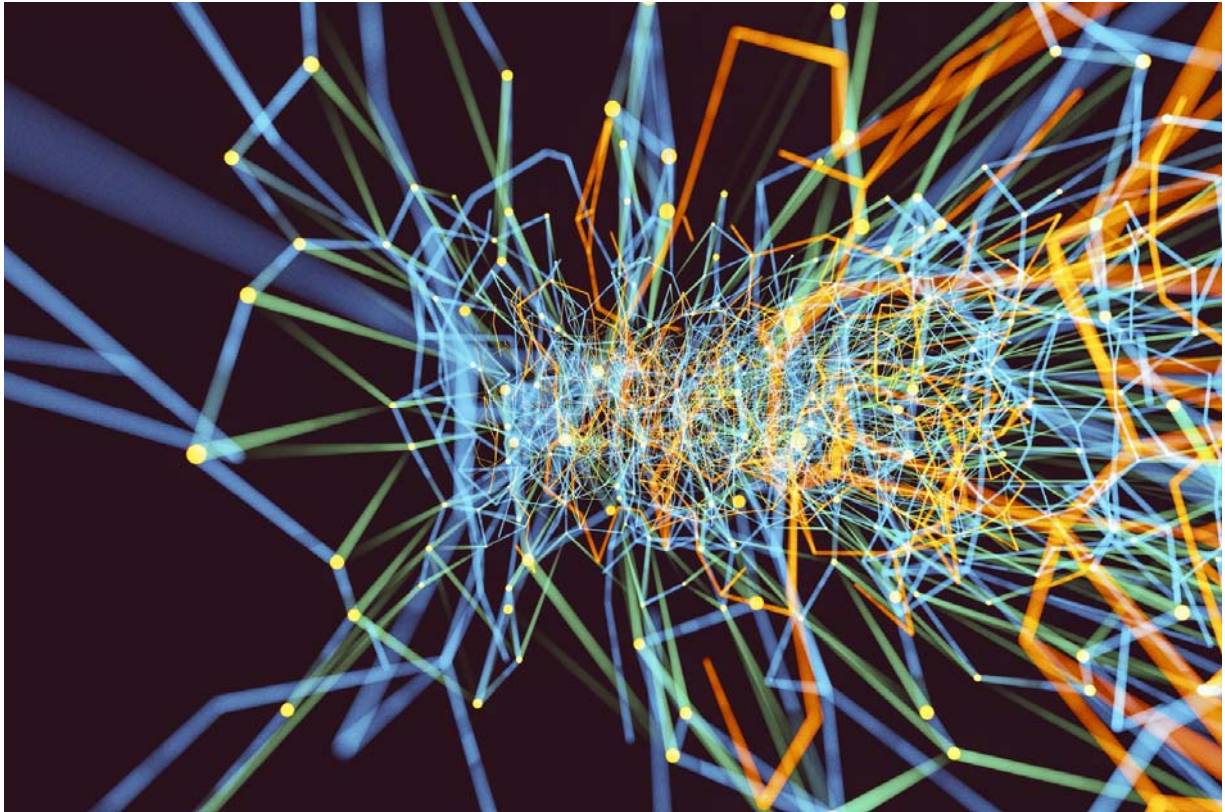


Figure 1: Emergent orders as properties of complex structures (symbolic image), © gremlin.

Since the mid-2010s, the idea that borders are complex phenomena has become increasingly prevalent in border studies (Gerst et al. 2018; Scott 2021; Wille 2021; Brambilla 2023; Wille et al. 2024). This is linked to aiming to overcome simplistic views of borders that are based on a line concept and closure principle, as well as the idea of a territorial mosaic of separate national containers. Despite the emergence of a complexity discourse, there is hardly any work that explains what exactly is meant by complex borders or complexity-oriented border research (for example Gerst et al. 2018; Brambilla 2023; Wille 2024).

## **Status Quo**

Rather, border studies are characterized by a diffuse understanding of complexity and a plurality of what is qualified as complex at borders. The singularity, multiplicity, multidimensionality, multivalence, relationality, agonality, or diffuseness of borders are often declared to be complex without reflecting on this qualification in more detail. An everyday understanding of complexity that prematurely equates the term with complicatedness or a lack of clarity seems to be widespread in the debate. However, a look at complexity theories shows that progressive trends in border studies are quite compatible with complexity thinking. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to think more closely about what complexity-oriented border research can be and what it can do.

## **Core Ideas of Complexity Thinking**

To put it pointedly, complexity research focuses on material or social structures and their emergent properties, which the elements of which they are composed unfold in self-dynamic processes (Manson/O'Sullivan 2006, 678; Cilliers 2016, 141). The guiding principle here is the view that the whole – such as a border – is more than the sum of its constitutive parts. Or formulated analytically: The properties of complex structures cannot be explained through their elements but through the unpredictable and performative interplay of their elements. For this reason, the notions of interaction and emergence are crucial in complexity thinking; they indicate the focus on the reciprocal relationships between the structure's elements and the properties of the structure that emerge from their interplay. Complexity researchers are primarily interested in *how* the elements involved interact to form *which* patterns or orders, that then represent the structures' properties.

## **Textural Border Ontology**

These core ideas of complexity thinking provide reference to how complexity-oriented border research can be stringently aligned. This includes the elementary question of how borders can be seen as a complex of elements. Here, the texturalization of borders offers suitable starting points; it stands for the recent emergence of approaches that think bordering processes more comprehensively: in the (total) plurality of the practices, dimensions, actors and forms relevant to them, as well as partly in the interplay of these in space and time. Such approaches include, for example, the ethnographic border regime analysis (Transit Migration Research Group 2007), borderscapes (Brambilla 2015), bordertextures (Weier et al. 2018), and the assemblage approach (Sohn 2016). They follow a textural ontology of the border and present it

as a trans-territorial, trans-scalar, or trans-temporal complex consisting of more or less interrelated polymorphic elements.

### **Internal Border Views**

The focus of complexity theories on relationships and the resulting orders is both a gain and a challenge for border research. On the one hand, the idea of emergent orders can be connected to the ordering and ordered principle of the border. Here, complexity-oriented border research asks how, and which orders produce textural structures that become effective as borderings. On the other hand, this focus requires a decentering of the elements involved in bordering processes and an observational position located in the performative interplay of the elements. This is because the empirical observation in the performative ‘happening of the border’ allows a view into the complex interplay of the elements and thus insights into the self-dynamic emergences of b/orderings. Methodologies such as borderness (Green 2012), border as method (Mezzadra/Neilson 2013), migration as a prism (Hess 2018), bordertexturing (Weier et al. 2018), or border praxeology (Connor 2023; Gerst/Krämer 2017) offer useful starting points for such empirical internal border views.

### **Border Complexities as a Perspective**

The discussed reflections on complexity-oriented border research should be followed by a series of further questions concerning the construction of the research object, corresponding methods, disciplinary cooperation, and much more. For further debate, a concept is proposed that does not declare borders to be complex per se but rather offers a complexity-sensitive perspective on borders: Border Complexities is intended to stand for a concept inspired by complexity thinking that (a) sees borders as relational structures, (b) focuses on the self-dynamic and unpredictable interplay of their elements, and (c) on its emergent dis/orders, which become effective as borderings. Border Complexities thus connects to the textural ontology of the border, takes an internal view of the border, and goes analytically further than asking which dimensions play a role in bordering processes or to what extent the elements involved are territorially, actor-related, or scalarly diffused. Bordering processes that are viewed through the complexity lens cannot – as is common in current border studies – be explained by the plurality or polymorphism of the elements involved and their spatial distribution. Rather, Border Complexities addresses the emergent moment that manifests where the texture of the elements involved in bordering processes is merely a prerequisite for making their mutual relationships visible and analyzable – as an interplay effective for emerging

dis/orders. Border Complexities thus follows the meaning of *complexus* (lat.) in a twofold manner: On the one hand, the concept addresses “what is woven together” (Morin 2007, 6); on the other hand, it addresses the reciprocal relationships of the relevant elements and the resulting b/orderings.

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